

Sustainable Agro-Investment in Developing Regions: A Political Economy Perspective on Land Use and Community Resistance

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Abstract: This study aims to (1) analyse how public policies, power relations, and elite interests shape agro-investment practices in developing countries, and (2) explore forms of community resistance to unsustainable investments. Employing a qualitative, multilevel case study design, the research integrates macro-level policy analysis with micro-level field data collected through interviews with farmers, activists, government officials, and investors. Supplementary secondary data includes NGO reports, policy documents, and media accounts. Findings reveal that large-scale agro-investments are frequently driven by state-backed policies aligned with corporate interests, often marginalising local land rights. In response, communities employ diverse resistance strategies, ranging from symbolic daily acts to organised collective actions, as adaptive mechanisms against dispossession. Organisational capacity, institutional gaps, and multi-scalar networks shape these resistance practices. Theoretically, this article contributes by synthesising agrarian political economy, resistance theory, and socio-ecological sustainability. In practice, it identifies key elements that enhance resistance effectiveness, such as legal mobilisation and narrative framing around land rights and food sovereignty. The study underscores the agency of local actors in reshaping agrarian relations and calls for more inclusive, participatory land governance to achieve equitable, sustainable agro-investment systems.

Keywords: Agro-Investment Governance; Land Grabbing and Resistance; Political Economy of Agriculture; Community-Based Land Rights; Socio-Ecological Sustainability; Land Rights.

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1. Introduction

Large-scale agricultural investment, often referred to as agro-investment, has emerged as a key strategy for many developing countries to boost economic growth and strengthen food security. However, in practice, the land allocation process for such investments frequently compromises the interests of local communities and environmental sustainability [28]. This phenomenon is observable across various regions, including Sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America, where

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the expansion of agribusiness by transnational corporations or governments has led to agrarian restructuring, land conflicts, and significant socio-ecological transformations [8]. Similar investment patterns are evident in Indonesia, particularly in the Province of South Papua, where small-scale farmers and indigenous communities are often marginalised [1]. As natural resource pressures intensify, there is an urgent need to revisit the current agro-investment paradigm to make it more equitable and sustainable. Despite a growing body of literature on the environmental and social impacts of land grabbing and agrarian investments, in-depth analyses of how political power, national policies, and elite dynamics influence land allocation processes remain limited. Most existing studies focus either on economic or ecological consequences without systematically linking them to the complex political economy context [2]. Moreover, community resistance to exploitative investments remains underexplored, especially regarding subtle or covert strategies of defiance, as elaborated in the theory of everyday resistance. Therefore, there is a pressing need to critically reassess agro-investment practices through a political economy lens that is more sensitive to local dynamics.

This study employs a theoretical framework that integrates several key perspectives. First, the Political Economy of Agriculture underscores the role of political actors and economic power in determining the distribution of agrarian resources. Second, the theories of Land Grabbing and the Global Land Rush explain how global power structures facilitate large-scale land acquisitions with little regard for local rights [4]. Third, Resistance Theory, as developed by Borras and Franco [4], offers insight into how communities articulate both symbolic and direct forms of resistance. Fourth, Ostrom's [21] concept of social-ecological sustainability emphasises the importance of community-based and participatory resource governance as a pathway to long-term sustainability [23]. The objectives of this research are twofold: (1) to analyse how public policies, power relations, and elite interests shape agro-investment practices in developing countries; and (2) to explore the various forms of community resistance to unsustainable investments.

Accordingly, the study is guided by two central research questions: (1) How does political economy influence agro-investment patterns and land allocation in developing regions? and (2) What are the forms of community resistance to unsustainable agro-investments, and what factors determine their effectiveness? This study employs a qualitative approach, utilising a multilevel case study design that encompasses both macro-level policy analysis and micro-level community responses. The scientific contribution of this article lies in its integration of political economy analysis with local resistance dynamics in the context of sustainable agro-investment. It offers a cross-level perspective rarely addressed in contemporary agrarian literature and provides empirical insights from relevant case studies, such as those in Kalimantan and Ethiopia. Furthermore, this article enriches academic discourse on agrarian justice and land governance, offering policy implications for developing countries in formulating inclusive and sustainable agricultural investment strategies.

2. Literature Review

The political economy of agriculture provides a foundational framework for explaining the dynamics of power and interests in land allocation for agro-investment in developing countries. Ritchie et al. [25] are prominent figures in this school of thought, emphasising how state policies and elite power influence land distribution patterns, food production, and the state's role in managing the agrarian sector. This theoretical approach aligns with the concept of land grabbing developed by Borras and Franco [4], which refers to large-scale land acquisitions carried out without the consent of local communities, prioritising global investment interests. Additionally, Ajala's [1] theory of everyday resistance expands the understanding of local community responses, which are not always overt but are often carried out through symbolic and covert strategies. In the context of sustainability, the framework of common-pool resource management underscores the importance of collective governance in preventing ecosystem degradation caused by market and state pressures [21]. Previous studies have identified the negative impacts of land grabbing practices on the environment and local communities. For example, in Africa, foreign agricultural investments have led to soil degradation, water pollution, and the displacement of pastoral communities [1].

In Malawi, large-scale land acquisitions by companies such as Limphasa Sugar Corporation demonstrate that short-term economic gains often come at the high cost of diminished autonomy for local communities [12]. Other literature reveals that state policies frequently favour foreign investors at the expense of customary land rights. David et al. [7] illustrated in studies on Sudan and Nigeria. On the other hand, Baumann [3] research highlights the political-economic dimensions of land and water investments, revealing the complex interactions between global and local actors in controlling strategic resources. Although the literature on land grabbing has expanded significantly, a crucial gap remains in understanding how local community resistance can influence policy or even halt unsustainable investments. Many studies remain descriptive and fail to analyse the success factors behind resistance efforts, such as strategic alliances, media engagement, and legal mobilisation. Furthermore, dominant approaches in previous studies often focus narrowly on economic or ecological impacts without deeply engaging with the power structures underlying investment processes [9]; [8]; [33].

This highlights the need for research that integrates political economy perspectives with localised narrative analysis [19]. This article seeks to fill that gap by integrating theories of agrarian political economy and resistance to examine not only how policies

and dominant actors shape the direction of agro-investments, but also how local communities respond, adapt, and challenge such hegemonies. The study contributes to the literature by offering a cross-level approach that analyses global and national policies on the one hand, and local community strategies on the other. This approach enables a more comprehensive analysis of how local contexts mediate power relations and how resistance practices can create spaces for political or ecological transformation [20]; [6].

As a comparative context, the methodological approaches in previous studies tend to vary. Many researchers employ policy analysis or single case studies, such as in Brazil, where the collective ownership system of *fundos de pasto* is examined as a form of agrarian resistance against agricultural capitalism [10]. Meanwhile, legal and institutional research, such as that conducted by Pastuszko [22], explores legal issues in cross-border land control, emphasising the importance of legal frameworks in ensuring the sustainability of agrarian investments. However, few studies combine field observation with political theory and community narrative analysis, as proposed in this article. Based on the review above, this article will develop a conceptual framework integrating four main theories: agrarian political economy, land grabbing, resistance theory, and socio-ecological sustainability. These concepts will serve as analytical foundations to examine power relations, policies, and forms of community resistance in agro-investment sites in developing countries [29]; [34]. Through a qualitative methodological approach and a multilevel case study strategy, this analysis aims to generate a more nuanced understanding of agrarian conflict dynamics and the prospects for sustainability in the context of global agricultural investments [35].

3. Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach, utilising a multilevel case study strategy that integrates analysis at both the macro level (national and global policy and political economy) and the micro level (local impacts and community resistance to agro-investment). This approach was chosen for its capacity to reveal power dynamics, social narratives, and resistance practices that are often not explicitly captured in quantitative data. A multilevel case study also enables a contextual, in-depth understanding of the relationship between policy structures and local community experiences during agrarian transformation. The data sources used in this study consist of both primary and secondary data. Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with key informants, including farmers, local activists, regional government officials, and representatives from agro-industrial companies or investors [24]. These in-depth interviews aimed to explore local communities' perceptions, experiences, and resistance strategies. Secondary data were obtained from policy documents, reports from non-governmental organisations (NGOs), media records related to agrarian conflicts, and academic literature relevant to this study [18]. These secondary sources provide structural context to local dynamics and support data triangulation. The primary data collection techniques included semi-structured interviews conducted either face-to-face or online, depending on accessibility and the availability of ethical clearance at the research sites.

Additionally, participatory observation was conducted in areas affected by agrarian conflict to gain a direct understanding of social interactions, land-use patterns, and resistance dynamics. Document analysis was performed on national agrarian policy documents, investment contracts, and investigative reports from media and NGOs, serving as corroboration of field narratives [25]. Research instruments included interview guides developed based on the conceptual framework and systematically prepared field observation sheets designed to capture phenomena related to power relations and resistance. The data included informants who were directly involved in or affected by large-scale agricultural investments in the research locations—namely, Merauke Regency and Boven Digoel Regency, South Papua Province. Informants were selected purposively to capture a diversity of perspectives based on their social positions (community members, government officials, investors, activists). Documents included in the analysis were published within the last five years and directly related to agricultural policy, land conflict, or agrarian investment.

Exclusion criteria applied to documents or informants that were thematically irrelevant to the focus of the study or whose authenticity could not be verified. Opinion-based literature lacking analytical grounding was also excluded from the analysis. The unit of analysis in this study includes the narratives, actions, and social positions of actors involved in agro-investment processes. The primary subjects of inquiry are local farming communities, both those directly affected and those actively engaged in resistance efforts. The unit of analysis also includes institutional actors such as local government bodies and land licensing agencies, which play significant roles in shaping policy and power relations in the agrarian sector [27]. Data analysis was conducted using a thematic analysis approach. This process involved manual coding and categorisation of data based on key themes, including power relations, community resistance, and sustainability narratives. Data from interviews, documents, and observations were then analysed triangulatively to ensure the validity and consistency of information across sources [5]. NVivo software was used to support the coding process and to visualise the relationships between themes, serving as a tool for managing qualitative data [31]. Validation was conducted through member checking with key informants and research team discussions to ensure that data interpretations remained contextual and unbiased.

3.1. Research Findings

The findings of this literature review reveal that community resistance to land-grabbing practices in developing countries exhibits diverse characteristics, depending on specific political, social, and economic contexts. Overall, the synthesis can be classified into four primary categories:

- Forms of community resistance,
- Actors and resistance networks,
- Political-economic dynamics in agrarian conflicts, and
- Methodological trends in related studies

First, in terms of resistance strategies, affected communities employ a spectrum of actions, ranging from everyday resistance such as sabotage, non-cooperation, and land occupation to more overt collective actions, including demonstrations, road blockades, and legal advocacy. For example, in Laos, communities strategically exploited internal contradictions in state policy to maintain land access without directly confronting the government [14]. In the Philippines, the Manobo-Pulangihon people employed the “bungkalan” strategy, collectively cultivating unclaimed lands to assert their customary claims over ancestral territories [13]. Second, regarding actors and resistance networks, the findings indicate a reliance on local leadership, civil society organisations, and support from national and international advocacy coalitions. In Bangladesh, for instance, resistance against land acquisition by tea plantation companies was led by a coalition of local communities and legal actors employing political contestation [15]. Meanwhile, in Cambodia, resistance movements were fragmented and lacked cross-community organisation, thereby weakening their political impact [30].

Third, the reviewed literature underscores that land grabbing is closely intertwined with global and local political-economic dynamics. Many developing countries promote agribusiness investments through land concessions as part of free-market development strategies, often at the expense of local land rights. In Mindanao, for instance, pro-investment government policies created structural conditions that accelerated the dispossession of indigenous lands by agrarian corporations [13]. A similar pattern is evident in parts of Africa, where states act as key facilitators of foreign investor interests, frequently undermining the rights of local communities [1]. Fourth, from a methodological standpoint, most previous studies employed qualitative approaches such as ethnography, case studies, and document analysis to explore the dynamics of community resistance. For example, Sändig [26] synthesised 46 case studies from Global South countries to map three principal forms of resistance tactics: everyday resistance, collective action, and legal mobilisation. Other studies have shown how communities utilise legal rhetoric and alliances with NGOs to resist dispossession, although such strategies often yield only partial victories [32]. Thematically, this synthesis reveals five dominant themes:

- The role of the state in facilitating or hindering resistance.
- The socioeconomic impacts of large-scale agrarian investment.
- Unequal access to legal and political mechanisms.
- Adaptation of resistance strategies to local and global dynamics.
- Transformation of agrarian relations resulting from transnational capital investment.

These findings confirm that resistance to land grabbing is highly contextual, localised in practice, yet global in implication and is significantly shaped by the configuration of political and economic power in each region [4].

3.2. Thematic Map: Interlinking Power, Resistance, and Sustainability in Agro-Investment Conflicts

To illustrate the thematic relationships derived from this study, we present the following thematic map in Figure 1, which synthesises the core themes into a visual structure. This map illustrates how power relations, community resistance, and sustainability narratives are interconnected within the broader context of agro-investment. "Manual coding" processes and resistance strategies feed into the construction of sustainability discourses. At the same time, the intersection of agro-investment with state and community actors defines the direction and depth of local responses. The use of thematic mapping not only enhances conceptual clarity but also aligns with the principles of reflexive thematic analysis, enabling a systematic interpretation of socio-political complexities in land investment dynamics. This map illustrates how power relations, community resistance, and sustainability narratives are interconnected within the broader context of agro-investment. "Manual coding" processes and resistance strategies feed into the construction of sustainability discourses. At the same time, the intersection of agro-investment with state and community actors defines the direction and depth of local responses. The use of thematic mapping not only enhances conceptual clarity but also aligns with the principles of reflexive thematic analysis, enabling a systematic interpretation of socio-political complexities in land investment dynamics.

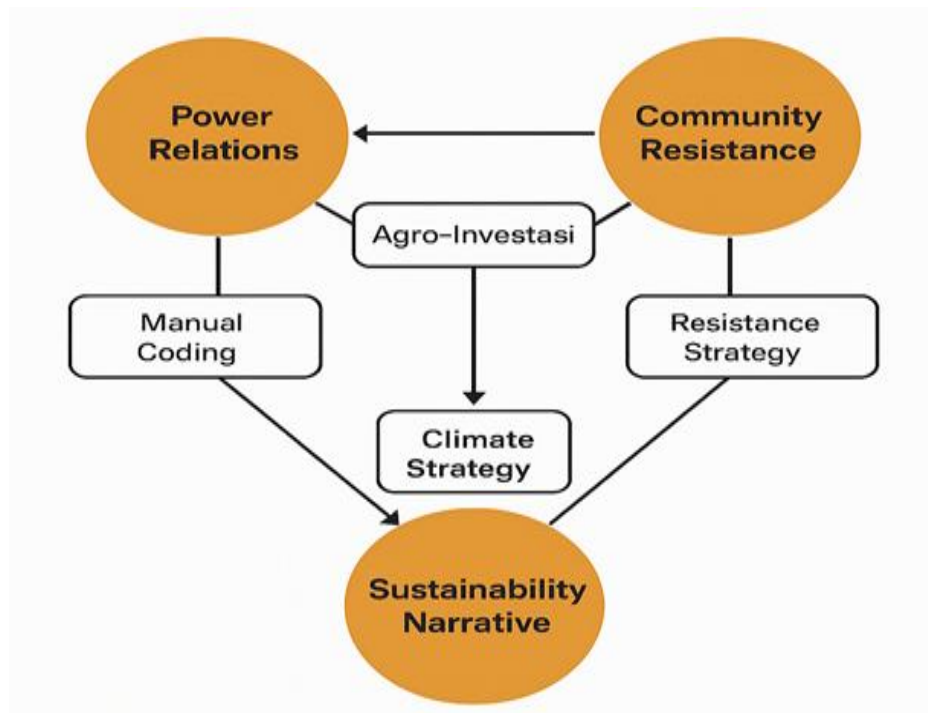


Figure 1: Thematic map of Agro-investment conflicts in developing countries

Table 1 presents the most important themes highlighted by the figure on agro-investment conflicts in developing nations. It shows how power dynamics and community opposition interact through Agro-Investasi's actions. The role of climate strategy emerges as a component that shapes how these interactions occur. All the topics come together to tell a larger story about sustainability, highlighting the long-term effects of investment conflicts. Table 1 provides a clear picture of the relationships that shape rural socio-ecological dynamics.

Table 1: Summary of key themes in Agro-investment conflicts

Theme/Element	Description
Power Relations	Examines how authority, control, and influence shape agro-investment outcomes.
Community Resistance	Reflects local opposition and collective actions against investment pressures.
Agro-Investasi	Represents the central investment actor linking power dynamics and community responses.
Climate Strategy	Shows environmental considerations that mediate interactions and conflicts.
Sustainability Narrative	Combines all themes into a broader storyline about long-term social and ecological viability.

4. Discussion

The main findings of this study confirm that community resistance to land-grabbing practices under agro-investment schemes in developing countries takes complex, adaptive forms that are highly dependent on local socio-political contexts. The synthesis of the literature reveals that resistance strategies are not always openly organised but also occur through mechanisms of “everyday resistance,” which, although covert, are nevertheless effective in defending land rights [14]. In line with the objectives of this research, these findings demonstrate that resistance is not merely the result of global activist mobilisation, but also stems from internal contradictions within governance systems or state policies that open up space for local contestation. The interpretation of these findings draws upon the framework of agrarian political economy, particularly David Harvey’s concept of accumulation by dispossession, which explains how capitalist expansion through land dispossession often provokes resistance from subaltern classes [13]. In this context, resistance theory is further enriched by Polanyi’s “double movement” approach, wherein neoliberal market forces are met with protective societal responses to defend livelihoods and agrarian spaces [30]. Compared to previous studies, these results reinforce the synthesis conducted by Sändig [26], who categorised resistance tactics into three main types: everyday resistance, collective action, and legal mobilisation [26].

While some studies emphasise the failure of resistance due to state repression or political co-optation [16], this article highlights the success of hybrid and adaptive tactics that exploit bureaucratic ambiguities and contradictory development rhetoric within the state. The scholarly contribution of this article lies in its integration of multi-theoretical resistance perspectives with political economy approaches to explain why resistance remains possible even under authoritarian regimes or in the presence of powerful investors. This study broadens the understanding of local communities as not merely victims of land grabbing but also significant [14]; [13]. Nonetheless, it must be acknowledged that this literature-based approach has certain limitations, particularly in the underrepresentation of empirical studies from West Africa or Latin America, where similar dynamics are also unfolding [17]. Moreover, the heterogeneity of resistance forms makes generalisation difficult. Some studies, for instance, fail to differentiate between grassroots resistance and resistance mediated by NGOs or local elites [11]. Based on these findings and limitations, this review recommends strengthening local communities' organisational capacity and developing public policies grounded in agrarian rights and ecological justice principles. Furthermore, future research should adopt comparative or longitudinal approaches across regions to better understand the evolving dynamics of resistance in response to shifts in global political and economic structures [9]; [1].

5. Conclusion

The synthesis of this literature review reveals that the dynamics of agro-investment in developing countries are inextricably linked to the power configurations embedded within both global and national political economies. Large-scale agricultural investments are frequently facilitated by the state through policy frameworks that favour corporate actors, often at the expense of local communities' rights to land and resources. In this context, community resistance emerges in various forms, ranging from everyday symbolic acts to overt collective mobilisations, generally serving as social defence mechanisms against land dispossession. These findings underscore that community resistance strategies represent adaptive responses to oppressive power structures and are highly dependent on local organisational capacity, network support, and institutional gaps within agrarian policies. Theoretically, this article contributes to the understanding of opposition to unjust agro-investment practices by integrating agrarian political economy, resistance theory, and the concept of socio-ecological sustainability.

Its practical contribution lies in identifying key elements that strengthen resistance effectiveness, such as legal mobilisation, cross-scalar network solidarity, and narrative strategies linking land rights to ecological justice and food sovereignty. Conceptually, the article expands the understanding of how local communities are not merely passive victims of agrarian globalisation but active agents capable of reshaping agrarian relations through context-specific and diverse resistance practices. As a follow-up, deeper, comparative empirical research is needed to examine the dynamics of resistance across regions under agro-investment pressure. Furthermore, policymakers in developing countries should consider designing agrarian policies that are more inclusive, transparent, and participatory, and that position local communities as central actors in the governance of agrarian resources. Strengthening community capacity and recognising customary land rights are essential steps toward a more just and sustainable agro-investment system.

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